

**Berisha sends in tanks and fi**

# Albanian soldiers win back key towns

**Helena Smith and Reuter  
in Tirana**

**T**ROOPS went into action to put down the armed uprising in southern Albania yesterday, but faced stiff resistance and in one skirmish appeared to be forced to retreat.

Tanks and fighter planes joined the operation, and fears grew that Europe's poorest country could be heading toward civil war.

Witnesses said units of heavily armed troops and secret police regained control of several key towns in the region yesterday, including the ethnic Greek enclave of Delvino. The town is one of many where protesters have looted, burned and ransacked army depots and municipal buildings since anti-government protests exploded into pitched battles between state forces and thousands beggared by the collapse of bogus investment schemes.

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But the army retreated after a clash with armed insurgents near the village of Styari, six miles east of the port of Sarande, which left four villagers and at least two soldiers wounded, witnesses said. "Eyewitnesses just told us that the battle is over and the troops withdrew," Dimitris Stefanos, an ex-prefect in the southern port of Sarande, said by telephone. "The fighting lasted about 40 minutes and at least two soldiers were wounded."

A Greek journalist at the scene said: "The people won. The army, about 60 soldiers, got into their trucks and drove away."

tured from the army gleefully through the streets of Sarande. Hundreds of heavily armed men set up a defence line in the hills at the entrance to the town, saying they were determined to fight to the finish.

The protesters say they will back down only once President Sali Berisha and his rightwing Democratic Party resign. Western diplomats in Tirana said Mr Berisha was determined to quash the rebellion by isolating the rebel enclaves, not least the port town of Vlore which has raged out of control for the past three weeks.

Yesterday, state television reported that residents in the southern town of Fier had handed in 3,500 weapons and explosives seized from nearby army barracks. They had responded to a call by the government to return the arms or face "being shot at without warning".

The Dutch prime minister, Wim Kok, said the European Union was sending his country's foreign minister to Albania tomorrow for emergency talks.

A Council of Europe delegation arrived yesterday but an expected mission from the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe failed to arrive. "The Albanians said they don't know whether this is the right time," a Western diplomatic source source said.

Last night Tirana remained eerily calm on the fourth day of a dusk-to-dawn curfew imposed by the government. In an unwelcome reminder of the era of Enver Hoxha, the late dictator who ruled Albania for 45 years, only secret police now speed along the capital's wide, Italian-designed boulevards after 8pm.

But international human rights groups, who have converged on the city, say it is "boiling underneath". Since the weekend scores of opposition leaders and journalists have gone into hiding for fear of their lives.